

The False Consciousness Falsehood

American intellectual life has a large number of ways of responding to an argument without actually addressing its substance — namecalling in other words. You can say that someone is “blaming the victim” or spinning a “conspiracy theory” or “assuming people are stupid” or that they’re subject to “false consciousness”.

Most of these are kind of transparently silly, but even otherwise smart people seem to think the false consciousness charge has some heft to it. The argument is never fully spelled-out, but the argument seems to be that to think that people are systematically mistaken about their own interests is the kind of crazy idea that only vulgar Marxists would believe and, furthermore, it requires assuming that people are stupid and explaining how you’ve been able to see past the illusion.

Well, I’m personally not under any illusion that providing a rational explanation is going to stop people from leveling this charge, but I figure one ought to, if only to set the record straight.

Let’s begin with a parable — a simplified case that will at least establish whether some of these arguments are logically true. Imagine a new regime comes to power that decides to imprison everyone with red hair. They insist that there is nothing amiss about this — they were elected democratically, and furthermore, everyone imprisoned is still allowed to vote. But inside the prisons, they only permit limited contact with the outside world. Most prisoners only watch the one prison-provided news station which is systematically biased, constantly suggesting that the Purple Party is in favor of additional rights for red-haired people while their opponents, the Yellow Party, just used the red-haired issue for pandering. (Anyone who’s watched, say, Fox News discuss black issues will know how this is possible.) The result is that when election time rolls around, the majority of red-haired prisoners vote for the Purple Party candidate who gets into power and provides no new rights for them.

Call it false consciousness or not, I think it’s perfectly reasonable to look at this situation and say while the red-haired prisoners are not stupid, they are systematically mistaken, which is leading them to act against their own interests. If they knew the truth they would vote for the Yellow Party, the party which wants to take steps to get them out of prison, instead. Furthermore, it’s possible to imagine that there are some prisoners who, through one means or another, have learned this and thus are able to see this situation while the other prisoners do not. (They try to tell the other prisoners what’s going on, but they keep getting labeled conspiracy theorists.)

Now obviously vast portions of America are not imprisoned. But most people do get their news from a small number of sources and I think everyone would agree that, in one way or another, these sources are systematically biased. (You can argue about which way they’re biased or whether it makes a difference, but I think it’s pretty clear that all the major news sources share a general conception of what is “news” and what isn’t.) So why is it so implausible that something similar is going on?

The major difference between the two scenarios is that in the first, people were basically forced to watch the biased news, while in the real world they have lots of other alternatives. But I’m not sure this matters as much as it might seem at first.

First, most people have busy lives that don’t revolve around the news or politics and thus are going to get the news in the most convenient form they can. For most people, this is typically television or the newspaper. But starting a new television station or newspaper is very expensive, especially if you want it to have wide reach, and the only projects that can get funding and advertising are those that buy into at least some of the systematic biases. So for most people, there simply isn’t a better alternative when it comes to the formats they want.

Second, even if someone gets their news from the Internet or another source where getting started is less expensive, they may not know about the alternatives. If you grew up with your parents reading the *New York Times* you may simply live your life checking in on nytimes.com, without ever stopping to wonder whether the news you were getting was systematically biased and whether there was some more preferable alternative.

Again, just as there was no way for the prisoners to know they were being lied to, it’s not really reasonable for the average person to figure out that they’re getting biased news if the only news they read comes from biased sources.

Now I’m not arguing here that this idea is *true* (that would require more real-world evidence), merely that it’s possible. The fact is that we live in a world where most people get their information about what’s going on from a very small number of sources which tend to report largely the same things in the same way. This seems like a rather important fact of life and I think we ought to stop dismissing suggestions that it might have some negative effects on people out of hand.

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